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ABSTRACT

A recent study of literacy practices in early childhood services prior to school entry (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught, 1999) revealed that, for both parents and early childhood staff, school entry often looms as a threat to children's confidence and self-esteem rather than as an opportunity for individual development. This can result in staff introducing inappropriate practices in preschools and day care centers in order to prepare children for the practices they are expected to encounter when they start school. It can also result in parents putting pressure on early childhood staff to become more like school and putting pressure on their children to engage with formal academic tasks. It is suggested that an important element of successful transition in literacy is an increase in shared understandings between families, early years teachers and prior to school staff about key practices that support early literacy. Kindergarten teachers and school principals need to know more about what happens in the preschool years and to plan a transition in early literacy practices in which it is the kindergarten classroom that initially adapts to the children's previous experiences rather than having the preschool reflect the school. (Author/RS)

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Literacy and Starting School:
Views of Parents and Early Childhood Staff and Issues for Transition

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Abstract

A recent study of literacy practices in early childhood services prior to school entry (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught, 1999) revealed that, for both parents and early childhood staff, school entry often looms as a threat to children's confidence and self-esteem rather than an opportunity for individual development. This can result in staff introducing inappropriate practices in preschools and day care centres in order to prepare children for the practices they are expected to encounter when they start school. It can also result in parents putting pressure on early childhood staff to become more like school and putting pressure on their children to engage with formal academic tasks. It is suggested that an important element of successful transition in literacy is an increase in shared understandings between families, early years teachers and prior to school staff about key practices that support early literacy. Kindergarten teachers and school principals need to know more about what happens in the preschool years and to plan a transition in early literacy practices in which it is the kindergarten classroom that initially adapts to the children's previous experiences rather than having the preschool reflect the school.

Introduction

Here are two quotations that seem apposite as an introduction to this paper:

"When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimise shock so that the plant is established as easily as possible" (Cleave, Jowett and Bate, 1982, p. 195).

"Continuity in the early grades is critical. Children who are supported by an emergent literacy curriculum in the prekindergarten and kindergarten years, only to be faced with a subskills approach in 1st grade, will not only be confused, they will be unable to demonstrate what they do know about literacy" (Strickland, 1990, p. 23).

These two quotations remind us that children in transition are vulnerable. School entry is usually a mixture of stress and anxiety, excitement and anticipation. The curriculum moves from a more general developmental focus to an increased cognitive focus. There is more emphasis on comparative assessment. There are different structural and environmental constraints.

Often, there are also changes in pedagogy. These may be particularly apparent in early literacy pedagogy. For many teachers and parents involved in a 1998 project, "Mapping Literacy

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Practices in Early Childhood Services", school loomed as a threat to children's well-being, self-esteem, and confidence.

The Project: Mapping Literacy Practices in Early Childhood Services

The project, Mapping Literacy Practices in Early Childhood Services (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught, 1999), was the first stage in the development of a professional development resource for prior to school services in New South Wales, Australia. It was funded by the government departments[1] responsible for supporting and monitoring children's development within early childhood services. Findings support the premise that many parents and early childhood educators have differing perceptions of what constitutes appropriate, high quality support for early literacy.

Seventy-nine early childhood classrooms[2] took part. Interviews were conducted with 158 staff with a range of qualifications (degree, diploma, untrained). Nine parent focus groups, with a total of 60 parents, were conducted.

Three data collection measures were used in the Mapping Project:

The Early Childhood Language and Literacy Scale (ECLLS), developed by the research team, based on ECERS-R, the internationally recognised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998). This scale gave a good picture of the general environment of each center and the extent to which it supported children's early literacy;

Interviews with staff, both trained and untrained, to ascertain staff views, beliefs and values regarding early literacy, the ways in which they included it in their programs, and the extent to which they were familiar with the children's home and community literacy experiences;

Focus group discussions to ascertain the views of family members regarding early literacy and what was happening to support this in the early childhood service, the home and the community. One of these groups consisted of Aboriginal family members and was facilitated by an Aboriginal aide from the preschool involved; another was conducted in a language other than English.

These three sources of information allowed data triangulation to support discussion of findings.

Findings relating to transition to school

A major finding of the Mapping Literacy Practices project was a lack of congruence in the early literacy perspectives of families and staff in early childhood services. It is important to note that, despite this lack of congruence, the two groups shared the same underlying concerns for the children who were their joint responsibility. Both groups wanted to do their best to make sure that the children would not be overwhelmed by school pressures on literacy. Both

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[1] NSW Department of Community Services (DCS) and NSW Department of Education & Training (DET)

[2] In the majority of services, one room only was observed. There were six services in which observation took place in two rooms

groups wanted the children to be confident literacy learners. Both groups wanted the children to be prepared for school entry.

However, they often differed in how they believed these joint goals were best attained. The differences were mainly in three areas: what literacy learning is most appropriately developed prior to school entry; how this learning is best supported; and what roles staff and parents should play in children's early literacy. A fourth concern was one that was shared to some extent by both parents and staff, but felt most strongly by staff. This was the pressure of time.

Literacy learning prior to school entry

First, what aspects of literacy should be most appropriately developed in early childhood services prior to school. In general, teachers were more concerned with ensuring that children developed what Purcell-Gates (1996) calls "the big picture" of literacy. They believed that children should learn "to know what a book is about and be able to relate it to real life", that "a child who starts school with some understanding of those concepts, you know, that print is valuable in life, is going to mean that you've got much more of a motivation for learning to read and write." Listening and oral language were emphasised as the basis of literacy. "At the beginning of the year we do a lot with like speech development, language development, oral and that's sort of our focus. [It] seems to be over the years that seems to be what we're focusing on in the beginning to the end of the year - the making up of the stories and the retell".

Parents were often more concerned with word-level skills. "I don't know whether (my daughter) knows the other letters. She doesn't know her last name...she has a last name as well and she can't do that because they are not teaching her any other letters...There are millions of other things to write, as well as just her name." "They told us about the social skills, how they were getting on with the kids, but nothing about how good she is at writing, whether she has reached the standard".

However, there were many exceptions to this general statement. A number of early childhood staff, like parents, were concerned that children know word level skills. "We teach it here if they don't know the alphabet and they don't recognise the letters. By the time they go to school, they should know their name and things like that and they should know the letters, not just by name but by sight."

Supporting literacy prior to school entry

The second area in which parent and staff views differed was how early literacy learning is best supported. Both groups emphasised the importance of social interaction skills, but the emphasis was different. Parents were concerned that their child learn to fit in. "Kindergarten is going to be a shock to him, because he is going to have to do what he is told and sit at a desk". As the focus group interviews were held in the second half of the year, parents were getting increasingly anxious and wanted to see a change in emphasis in the preschool program.

"[T]hey need half way through the year to bring in more of the kindergarten line, first half just play and get to know each other, second half of the year, they have to knuckle down."

Staff wanted children to interact positively with other children and adults. "Once they start school, they need to be able to interact with other children and with teachers and adults."

There were differences in the views of parents and early childhood staff on what kind of program structure and program content best supported early literacy. Several parents wanted the preschool program to be structured, ie, more like school: "Not just Cinderella, not just fairy tales. That's fine for the 2 and 3 year olds, but not the 4's. You are going to school next year. You have graduated from the baby classes. We have to get you ready." "[Y]ou have to have your structure time, starting to learn some letters, writing their name, not a big deal or emphasis put on it, but being prepared to go to school writing name, alphabet and small words."

Parents generally approved of programs in which they could see a shift towards a more school-like approach: "[The children] used to get dropped there, have a play, play dough, eat and Mum would pick you up at midday. But now it's so organised and structured, sort of prep-school. It makes you feel the kids are more confirmed for school. I think they are more confident."

Parent and staff roles

There were some differences in how the different groups saw their role in children's emergent literacy. Parents didn't always feel supported by early childhood staff in their efforts to help their children. Some parents felt a heavy responsibility to make up for the lack of explicit instruction in the preschool: "There is not enough time in six weeks of holiday between preschool and school to learn foundation writing". "I am going to have to test her now during the school holidays to see what she knows...". "I know she is writing her name and things like that, but it doesn't feel like it is enough."

They were often concerned that they might do the wrong thing. This was particularly the case with helping their child learn to print: "...like Joshua puts a stick across his 'J' and I don't know if we showed him that, but...it keeps changing and I think, well, "J's" are like this now, I know "K's" have now got a loop in them..." "When I wrote her name with a capital 'a', I realised that I should have done a small 'a'."

Keeping up

Time pressures loomed large for early childhood staff. There was little sense of the Froebelian view that children's learning takes time and care. Many staff felt that the best thing they could do for the children was to take a clockwork mouse approach to school literacy preparation - wind the children up as tight as you can without breaking them and set them going. Hope they can get a head start before they run down! "It's very important so that the children, when [they] actually get to school, have a basic knowledge of what they are going to be doing, so it doesn't take them quite as long to learn how to read and learn how to write." "I think it's really important to prepare them for school because they are in school and get inundated with

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worksheets, stencils, words, books. It is expected of them to be able to start reading in kindergarten and I think it is important for their self esteem to be prepared with their literacy."

The fear of being left behind came out frequently in staff comments on the importance of having a focus on literacy in the years prior to school -"otherwise, down the track, they are going to be left behind"; "they get very left behind"; "they will just be so much further behind everyone else"; "they're behind before they've even started"; "they are well behind the eight-ball before they even start."

The concern of early childhood staff that the children would experience failure and lose confidence came up frequently. "When they go to school, they have to be able to cope and they can't lose their self esteem." "If they're listening and sitting down here and at home, then they can sit quietly and learn more when they are at school."

Early childhood staff expressed sympathy for the challenging conditions faced by teachers in the first years of school: "You have to be realistic and say that class sizes are too big for little children and that teachers are expected to be fantastic in such a wide range of curriculum areas that there is not always the time and the individual instruction available for the kids that need it, so if we can send them to school with a bank to draw on, then I think it's important." "One teacher for 27 children - it is so easy to miss that quiet achiever." "[I]f the teachers have to go around and write each and every child's name, the kindergarten class is thirty..."

Summary

These findings remind us that:

1. Both parents and staff in early childhood settings want to do their best to give young children optimal opportunities for success in literacy;
2. A lack of shared understandings means that they may pull in different directions rather than in the same direction;
3. Increasing pressures on children to become literate are leading to inappropriate practices in prior to school settings.

A recent article in "The Times" in England (8/7/99) reported "big improvements in standards" following a four-year study that examined returns from 18,000 English primary schools. The Chief Inspector of Schools was quoted as stating, "if we cannot get the foundations right in our primary schools, then everything else is built on sand."

I'm sure we would all agree. The question is, how do we "get the foundations right"? The report evidenced the following signs of progress:

- A move away from topic-based teaching to more specialised subject teaching;
- More use of whole-class teaching;
- Increased grouping of pupils by ability.

For many early childhood educators, these would not appear to be marks of progress in the first years of school. In fact, they might represent the opposite and to be clear indications of an inappropriate push-down curriculum, not only operating to influence prior to school settings inappropriately, but to influence the first years of school inappropriately. The article goes on

to report that an area of concern is that boys are falling more and more behind girls in literacy. One reason for this may well be inappropriate teaching methods. Dunn & Kontos (1997) report that "[t]he emotional costs of academically-oriented classrooms, particularly for minority children from low-socioeconomic families and especially boys, are real. Many children from all backgrounds exhibit more stress in didactic settings than in child-initiated environments" (p. 9).

Many of the early childhood staff in the Mapping Project study felt that they were largely ignored by schools (even when they were structurally part of the school) and that the knowledge they had of the children's literacy development was neither wanted not valued. Yet Strickland (1990) reminds us that "[c]ontinuity in the early grades is critical. Children who are supported by an emergent literacy curriculum in the prekindergarten and kindergarten years, only to be faced with a subskills approach in 1st grade, will not only be confused, they will be unable to demonstrate what they do know about literacy." (p. 23) For the children in this study, a subskills approach was perceived by both parents and early childhood staff to occur as soon as the children enter school.

It is now generally accepted that high quality early childhood education makes a long term positive difference to children's lives. A large scale, longitudinal study being carried out in New Zealand (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 1999) reports that the benefits of high quality early childhood experiences are still showing up at age 8. Positive findings are linked with high quality programs, participation rates and transition links.

Leavers (1999) describes three ways of quality and how is it measured. Two common ways are to look at:

Context, for example, an appealing arrangement of space, new and unconventional materials and activities, room for child initiative, an open form of organisation, activities directly related to children's experiences and interests, stimulating interventions;

Effects. Leavers' cites the development of dispositions - habitual ways of approaching life. He believes that a product-oriented system is dangerous for young children and is strongly against baseline assessment of skills and standardised testing of skills in early childhood. He suggests that achieving traditional academic goals - and literacy would be one of the strongest - does not in itself determine success in life or even in school. More important are intuition, self-management, lateral thinking, an exploratory drive, self-organisation, communicative competence.

Leavers' third way of measuring quality is to focus on what is happening in the child during the educational experience. He identified well-being and involvement as the two basic images of quality.

Well-being is a social dimension. Children's mental health is secured when they feel at ease, act spontaneously, are open to the world, show vitality and self-confidence, enjoy life.

Involvement is a cognitive dimension. Deep level learning takes place when children are concentrated and focused, mentally active, fully experiencing sensations and meanings.

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enjoying the satisfaction of their exploratory drive and operating at the very limits of their capacity.

In literacy learning as in all areas of the early childhood curriculum, children will most often experience a sense of well-being and involvement when the curriculum meets their needs and interests and is appropriate for their stages of development.

Conclusion

There are many admirable practices in place in some schools to ease the transition to school in general terms. There is less in place relating to more specific areas such as literacy learning. To return to the quotations with which I started, transitions would be easier if they were less of a shock. But when well-meaning, caring teachers and parents try to ease the shock by allowing an inappropriate, "push-down" curriculum to establish a foothold in the prior to school settings, this is in children's interests. One of the next steps to be taken is to encourage teachers in the first years of school and school principals to learn more about literacy practices in prior to school settings so that continuity develops through a "push-up" curriculum instead.

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Notes

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